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Living in the Plantationocene
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Preceding centuries of exploitation and commodification of all life and the natural world have led us to the crises we face today. To describe the dramatic changes our species has forced upon the planet, in 2000, scientists Eugene Stormer and Paul Crutzen dubbed the geological epoch we inhabit the Anthropocene (Global Change Newsletter). Although the term is useful to distinguish the altered composition of the atmosphere, soil, and oceans that human activity has produced from the ecological baseline of the Holocene, some scholars are critical of the term. Not all humans are equally to blame for the environmental degradation which surrounds us. Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore have proposed a more appropriate term for this era would be the Capitalocene, as it points to capitalism as the root of these problems which have been in the making since the fifteenth century. Alternatively, scholars Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing describe this period as the Plantationocene to better elucidate the history of racial oppression, violence and economic inequality which is inseparable from the history of ecological exhaustion and collapse (Moore et al. 6).

The environmental movement which was developed to combat the corporate forces causing these injustices has historically suffered from cultural homogeneity. Winona LaDuke makes this argument in her 1994 essay "Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Environmental Futures." In the United States, environmentalism is often a predominantly white endeavor, which Moore et al. in "Plantation Legacies" find troubling as it obscures the "colonial and imperial relations of power" which shaped the course of the nation and its inhabitants (10). By lacking diverse cultural representation- especially the voices of indigenous people, who represent the only society to sustainably live within North America for very long- US environmentalism is blinded by privilege and the absence of traditional ecological knowledge. Even worse, the movement has been seen abroad as "neocolonial, Western impositions inimical to the resource priorities of the poor in the global South" (Nixon 4).

In the United States, environmentalism's history is intertwined with the idea of wilderness, an American cultural myth which William Cronon traces back to Romanticism and frontier expansion in "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature" (1995). Since Biblical times, traditional Western thought saw the wilderness as a frightening, dangerous wasteland. Beginning in the eighteenth century, the Euro-American conception of wilderness began to shift from producing emotions of fear to inspiring sensations of wonder. Romanticism and its emphasis on the sublime, supernatural and awesome power of nature transformed the wilderness from a place of "satanic temptation" to "a sacred temple," as reflected in works by Thoreau, Wordsworth and naturalist John Muir (Cronon 7). This changing view of wilderness was also influenced by the roughly simultaneous development of frontier primitivism, an American longing for a simpler way of life which was embodied in the country's westward expansion and belief in manifest destiny. As a result of these cultural shifts, people increasingly began to view nature as an escape from the modern world, a retreat often described with spiritual overtones. In the decades following the Civil War, this shift was embodied in the rapid establishment of wilderness areas and national parks.

Yet despite the newfound reverence for wilderness, it was still viewed as something inherently separate from civilization and the modern world. This idea still influences our contemporary culture, especially in modern environmentalism. Wilderness has become a part of the American identity as a vestigial remnant of frontier primitivism, our national myth of cowboys, rough-riders and rugged individualism. Today, these romantic notions are used by corporations marketing their products to Americans wanting to appear "outdoorsy" or adventurous. Of course, the elite class has had privileged access to wilderness since Thoreau's time, and the late nineteenth-century boom of national parks reflects this "peculiarly bourgeois form of antimodernism" (Cronon 9). Upper-class men, worried about the emasculating effects of civilization, propagated the myth of frontier primitivism and sought escapes in big-game hunting trips or luxurious hotels in sublime landscapes. Just as it was once viewed by colonists as a passive female resource, the American concept of Nature was again embroiled in gendered rhetoric.

Instead of viewing today's environmental issues in comparison with a baseline of pristine wilderness untouched by the hands of men, which is a distorted romantic view of the white affluent that ignores indigenous peoples' impact on their environment, it is more productive and honest to view them in the context of the Plantationocene. The plantation system is both a suitable metaphor for the large-scale commodification of the planet and all of its life, and a reality for many parts of the world affected by industrial agriculture. This system takes the colonial, extractivist conception of nature to an extreme, and has sown the seeds for today's "racialized violence, land alienation, and species loss [which] are recurrent themes of the Plantationocene" (Moore et al. 10). Our current system of industrialized agriculture continues this exploitation at an increasing rate, through the toxicity of its pesticides, its profligate waste of resources, and its attack on biodiversity as well as the impoverishment of wage workers which sustain it. The predatory nature of this system is well represented in the current expansion of palm oil monocultures and deforestation in the Global South, a development which led anthropologist Tania Murray Li to declare "plantations are back" (Moore et al. 1).

Plantation zones, found for example in Indonesia, represent the intersection of ecological and human rights abuses. Indonesia produces 60% of the world's palm oil due to its tropical climate and carbon-rich soil (Petrenko et al. 2016). The investors and government officials who designed the plantation system in rural Indonesia intended to entirely transform "underutilized land," as well as the lives of its subsistence farmer villagers and entire biota (Li, 330). Industrial

agriculture here aggressively disrupts the existing ecosystem and forces the villagers into lives of hard labor with little pay, what Li dubs a new sort of “mafia system.” These kinds of arduous yet largely unrecognized conditions which are a reality for many people today (particularly in the Global South, but across the planet) led literary scholar Rob Nixon to coin the term “slow violence.” Unlike the spectacular explosions of violence favored by corporate media, slow violence “occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space” (Nixon 2). Slow violence is inextricably linked to environmental degradation, as these are the twin crises created by centuries of imperialism, capitalism, and industrialization.

The situation of wage workers in palm oil plantations illustrates just one example of the kind of slow violence that is already experienced by billions but will be further exacerbated by climate change, as rising temperatures reduce crop yields to ultimately break the current system of agriculture and rising sea levels displace climate refugees from coastal regions. Many people are also already “displaced without moving” as their communities are ecologically undermined by the forces of global capitalism (Nixon 19). Slow violence serves as “a powerful reminder that environmental problems cannot be decoupled from histories of colonialism, capitalism, and racism that have made some human beings more vulnerable than others to warming temperatures, rising seas, toxic exposures, and land dispossession occurring across the globe” (Moore et al. 3). The extent of slow violence ranges from the Niger Delta where people toil in extreme heat amid a landscape polluted by decades of oil spills to Cancer Alley in Louisiana where industrial plants have made residents 50 times more likely to have cancer than an average American, an area now suffering massive losses from COVID-19 (Pasley).

In order for environmental movements of wealthy countries to be effective, they must recognize the realities of slow violence and learn from the environmentalism of the poor. The tension between “full-stomach” and “empty-belly” environmentalism, Nixon argues, will dramatically shape the future of the movements and of the planet itself. They also must learn the lessons of traditional ecological knowledge which have been ignored by the European industrial mind but provide alternatives and solutions to the problems of industrial agriculture. In her aforementioned essay, Winona LaDuke proposes environmental partnerships with indigenous communities in environmental and resource management. She argues the failure of the environmental movement stems from their culturally limited worldview which ignores indigenous ecological knowledge and the issue of consumption. The Zuni Sustainable Agriculture Project and the several Anishinabeg Resource Management Initiatives illustrate the power of applying indigenous knowledge to ecosystem management, while these voices continue to be left out of major decisions, such as those in the Great Plains Initiative (LaDuke 140). Indigenous knowledge of agriculture is intimately connected with the land of the people who have developed and practiced it, unlike the exploitative nature of industrial agriculture.

The unsustainable nature of the current agricultural system has led some to investigate new ways of growing food. The Land Institute’s essay “Transforming human life on our home planet, perennially” outlines the failings of agriculture and introduces the model of agroecology to develop a more ecospheric approach. This method can be described by their conviction that “our shared human responsibility is to live on, not dominate, our home planet” (Jackson et al. 44). A similar approach is being taken by farmers and beekeepers within the United States. Regenerative agriculture, as demonstrated in *The Pollinators*, offers a solution to the capitalist strategy of cheap food by taking into account ecologically responsible farming practices, rather than just convenient and profitable ones (Nelson). The new focus on agricultural sustainability is building a worldwide

following and provides an alternative to our current system of food production (Regeneration International). By listening to what nature, animals and plants can teach us, we can begin to practice these more sustainable techniques on a larger scale. This has already been understood by indigenous cultures for centuries and is reflected in their traditional practices.

With its emphasis on reciprocal relationships, the regenerative agriculture movement bears a kinship with indigenous ways of life. Indeed, much can be learned from this traditional ecological knowledge to expand on this form of agriculture, still largely in its nascent stage in the United States. Currently, regenerative agricultural practices are based upon the philosophy's four core principles: to "progressively improve whole agroecosystems," design farming practices specific to the needs and content of each area, develop reciprocal relationships between all stakeholders, and to continuously grow individuals and communities to reach their potential (Terra Genesis International). These principles manifest themselves in practices such as no-till farming and pasture cropping, composting, and ecological aquaculture to name a few. Regenerative farming places a focus on the health of the soil, often overlooked by destructive industrial agriculture, through use of biochar- charcoal added to soils to improve its health and carbon sequestration capacity. Also contrary to common notions of agriculture is silvopasture, the conscious integration of forage for domesticated animals with trees to improve water quality, wildlife biodiversity and reduce heat stress in grazing animals (USDA). Practices of regenerative agriculture consider all members of an ecosystem and create more sustainable practices for living with the planet.

Our species is presented with unique challenges for surviving life in the Plantationocene as a result of the decisions made by generations of industrialists, governments and corporations. These decisions transformed Nature from a wasteland in the Western imagination to a resource to be conquered, when in reality it was neither all along. Indigenous knowledge, on the other hand, understood the reciprocal nature of our relationship with the world of which humans are just one part. Man unsuccessfully attempted to escape this relationship through capitalism, which in turn transformed the planet into one massive plantation, literally and symbolically. The consequences of industrialization, especially in agriculture, have devastated the planet, leading to great wealth for few and added struggle for many. The slow violence perpetrated on the poor worldwide, distributed across time and space, exemplifies the result of capitalism's folly. To move forward into the uncertain future ahead of us, we must learn how to live with the planet and not dominate it- knowledge known by indigenous peoples for centuries which must collectively be brought into practice once more.

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